Chapter VIII

STRIKES OF SERVICE
ORGANISATIONS
The strikes organised by different trade unions and the Chief Minister’s approach to them deserve special mention because he belonged to a party which always stood with working class people. Two agitations organised by the college teachers for direct payment of salary by the government and students agitation for the unification of fees do not come under this category and hence they have been mentioned elsewhere. But the other agitations organised by the working class people of different trade unions give a different picture. The strikes organised by the NGOs, employees of Electricity Board and Transport Corporation and the controversy regarding the establishment of Titanium Complex are explained in this Chapter.

It was the usual practice by the government to appoint pay commission to study about the salary structure of the government employees and submit recommendations for the revision of their salaries. The Non Gazetted Officers declared a strike on January 1973 demanding the appointment of a pay commission and grant of hundred rupees as interim relief, containment of prices of essential commodities and withdrawal of the increased professional tax\textsuperscript{1}. The government was not in a position to accept their demands because of the scarcity of funds. It
explained to the employees that the government was not in a position to increase their salaries due to the peculiar conditions prevailing in the state. To justify the stand of the government the Chief Minister explained that the government had already revised the Dearness Allowance of the employees three times since 1971\(^2\). The employees were not satisfied with the explanation of the Chief Minister and they declared strike from 10\(^{th}\) January 1973\(^3\). Though the strike was initiated by the NGOs, other employees belonging to almost all service organisations joined the strike during the same month. When all the service organisations including the teachers began to organise a state wide strike the state machinery of the administration faced a difficult situation. Almost all the major service organizations were controlled by the Marxist Party\(^4\). The organisations under the control of Congress and CPI did not have much following among the employees. Though the organisations under their control did not join the strike it had no effect. The strike adversely affected the working of government offices and schools.

When all the efforts on the part of the government to avoid the strike failed it decided to defeat the strike by utilising all the measures at its command. At first the government wanted to convince the people
regarding the injustice on the part of the employees because out of the total revenue of rupees 121 crores, 118 crores were spent on the salaries and pensions of the employees. The unorganised sections of the people had to compensate for the losses. The NGOs were the most numerous class of the government servants. The total number of employees including the NGOs, teachers and employees of the local bodies was estimated to be more than three and a half lakhs. The Chief Minister informed the people that there was no meaning of a government if the complete income of the government was distributed among the employees without looking after the welfare of the people. It was quite clear that the Chief Minister took the decisive role in manipulating to defeat the strikes.

When all the efforts of the government to avoid the strike failed the government adopted the last resort of banning the strikes by an ordinance which declared the public utility services as essential services. This step was usually taken by the authorities when there was no other means to come to an agreement with the striking employees. Many progressive writers and leftist activists expressed their view against this attitude of the government. The government refused to listen to the public opinion but took another step by banning demonstrations around the
secretariat. These measures taken by the government which was led by a Chief Minister who belonged to a Communist Party was an unprecedented event in the history of Kerala. The government adopted all methods to turn the public opinion against the strikes by repeated requests to stop the strike and explaining the helpless conditions of the government in meeting the demands of the strikers. The Chief Minister further issued a statement explaining the inability of the government to increase the salaries of the employees because it wanted to fulfill the commitments to the poor people of the state\textsuperscript{10}.

The next step adopted by the government was the method used by the Capitalist class by dividing the employee’s organisations. They were successful in persuading the NGO association controlled by the Congress, the Joint Council controlled by CPI not to join with the strike. The Chief Minister himself came forward by accepting some of the demands of the non-striking employees\textsuperscript{11}. This action of the Chief Minister was critisised by some leftist oriented thinkers as a step quite unexpected from a Chief Minister belonging to a Communist Party\textsuperscript{12}. The government also made use of all the weapons under its control to defeat the strikes. They included suspensions, transfers, arrests and termination of services\textsuperscript{13}. 
The final step taken by the Chief Minister was the declaration of *Dies Non*, making the days of the strikes as without salary. He also declared that service rules of government employees would be modified to deny subsistence allowance during the period of suspension. Some of the newspapers claimed that no Chief Minister in the state had adopted such draconian measures towards their employees.

The Chief Minister invited the strikers for a discussion to find out a solution to the problem on 2nd February 1973. The government in the meeting was represented by the Chief Minister and ministers for Home and Revenue and strikers were represented by the leaders of the opposition parties under the leadership of EMS Namboothiripad. Even though the discussions were held for a long time it was a failure. Similar meetings were held on 8th February, 9th February and 1st March but none of them were able to solve the problem. The Chief Minister came forward with certain concessions in favour of the strikers. The concession included an amount equivalent to salary of the days of strike would be given to them as a loan which would be taken back from their salary in instalments. The government was also prepared to cancel disciplinary measures taken
against them. The Chief Minister requested the employees to put an end to the strike on the basis of promises.

The employees of the striking associations were not satisfied with the promises made by the Chief Minister because none of their main demands were conceded. They felt that they were not going to get any concession from the government even though they continued agitation. They were not in a position to prolong the strike taking into consideration the sufferings of the public because of the strike. So they decided to withdraw the strike on 3rd March 1973.

**Strikes in the Electricity Board and Transport Corporation**

Achutha Menon’s attitude towards the strikes of employee was quite different from other leaders of the Communist Party. When there was a clash between the interests of the ordinary people and the working class people he always stood with the former taking into consideration their grievances which were represented by no organisations. That was the method adopted by him when he faced the strike organised by the NGOs and other service organisations. The same attitude was adopted by him when he faced the strikes organised by the Electricity Board and Transport
Corporation. People were eagerly looking for the attitude adopted by the Chief Minister in handling the strikes organised by the workers of the two establishments who were paid better than the employees of other government departments.

The employees of the Electricity Board went on a strike from 17th July 1973. Their main demand was the linking of Dearness Allowance to the cost of living index in the state\(^17\). All the unions under the control of the Marxist Party formed a Joint Action Council and began the strike by getting the support of many of the members of the associations which did not join the strike. The Chief Minister at the very outset rejected the demands of the strikers on the ground that pay revision to one particular section of the employees could not be justified. If that demand was met it would lead other organisations to raise similar demands. The general opinion regarding the strike of the employees of the Electricity Board was not favourable for the people because their service conditions were better than other employees. The Chief Minister was not prepared to accept their demands mainly because he was aware of the public resentment against the strike. However he convened a meeting of the strikers on 23rd July 1973 in which the Chief Minister, the Ministers of the Electricity and
Labour participated, but no solution was found to the problem. The Chief Minister was not prepared to come down from his stand. He warned the employee of stern action if they continued the strike. He further said that he had no hesitation of taking the extreme step of using MISA because electricity workers belonged to the part of essential services. When the employees continued with the agitation the government resorted to the extreme measures like suspensions, arrest and termination of services. One important feature of the strike of the employees of Electricity Board was that they turned to the sabotage of the electric installations and thus stopping of the day to day functioning of hospitals and other essential services. The attitude of the strikers was considered to be anti national by some sections of the press. Taking into consideration the seriousness of the situation the government had to seek the help of the army to give protection to the electric installations

When the strikers adopted measures like sabotage of electric installations in the public utility service the people also turned against them. They came to realise that the people would turn against them if they continued the strike. The prevailing circumstances forced the strikers to put an end to the strike. They were prepared to come to an agreement with
the government after receiving some minor concessions granted by the
government. They withdrew from the strike on 31st July 1973.

Here again it was due to the uncompromising policy adopted
by the Chief Minister that the employees of the Electricity Board had to
withdraw from the strike without getting any considerable gains. Here the
Chief Minister was able to utilise the public opinion gathering against the
employees in solving the problem. Once again the Chief Minister was able
to prove that he stood with the people when there was a conflict of
interests between the people and the organised trade unions.

**KSRTC Strike**

Immediately after the settlement of the strike of the NGOs the
employees of State Transport came forward with new demands. They
demanded that they should be granted the bonus at the rate of 14.5%. They
also wanted to get 3% exgratia which was given to them during 1971-72.22
One significant feature of the strike was that it was led by the Employees
Union under the control of CPI which happened to be the party of the
Chief Minister23. The INTUC Union led by the Congress also took part in
the strike.
Achutha Menon’s approach to the strike remained the same towards all the organisations whether they belonged to the Communist Party or the Congress. In this also he adopted the same policy which he had adopted in the case of NGOs. He was not prepared to accept the demands for the bonus at the rate of 14.5% because the transport corporation was running at a loss. In a Press Conference he clarified that the corporation had already eaten up rupees 6 crores out of the total capital of 13 crores. The following year also might face the same lose. Therefore the government was prepared to pay 8.33% of bonus which was already in practice. However due to the negotiations the government was willing to pay 11.5% of bonus. The employees were not satisfied with the announcement of the government and they declared to go on with the strike. The Chief Minister was determined to face the strike by declaring \textit{dies non} for the employees. The government was in a very difficult situation because the strike was organised by two major partners in the Ruling Front. The strike paralysed the working of government offices, educational institutions and the life of the common people. The Liaison Committee itself met with a special agenda of dealing with the strike. Its meeting held on 11\textsuperscript{th} September 1973 resolved to request the government
to settle the issue through negotiations. The Chief Minister convened the meeting of trade unions controlled by the Ruling Front partners in which he explained the reality of the situation, put forward the statistical data regarding the income and expenditure of the KSRTC and he was able to convince them that no government could continue in office in such a situation. He also agreed to reconsider his stand when there emerged a balance between the income and expenditure of the KSRTC. Being convinced at the explanations put forward by the Chief Minister, the trade unions under the ruling partners withdrew from the strike on 13th September. But the other unions continued their strike. The government had to adopt extreme steps like arrests and suspensions of the employees. They were also threatened with the provisions of MISA if they continued with the strike. The leader of the striking unions even came to the level of calling Achutha Menon an anti Communist who never sympathised with the working class. Due to the hard line followed by the government they had to withdraw their strike on September 28 1973 after accepting an offer of 12 days pay as advance. All the striking employees were raising slogans mainly against the Chief Minister because they believed that it was the uncompromising attitude of the Chief Minister that paved the way for the
failure of all strikes organised by the trade unions and government employees. However the fact cannot be denied that it was the Chief Minister who played a decisive role in facing the strike and defeating them without accepting any of their main demands.

The Titanium Complex

Apart from the problems created by the opposition parties inside the assembly are strikes of the service organizations outside it, the government had to face many difficult situations created by prominent leaders of the ruling parties like CPI. It became more difficult for the Chief Minister especially when the problems were created by people like T.V.Thomas and N.E.Belaram who were the prominent leaders of the CPI. Such as an issue become completed with regard to the granting of permit to the industrial monopoly house, Thapers to start the prestigious Titanium complex in the State. In fact it was the Central Government who granted the Thapers a letter of indent to start the firm in Kerala in 1968. But they could not start it due to many inconveniences prevailing in the State. The attempt of the Central Government to renew the indent was objected by the Industries Minister N.E.Belaram. His opinion was that a monopoly house
likes Thapers should not be granted permission to start such a sensitive factory in the Travancore Titanium Products, a public sector undertaking should be allowed to start the factory\textsuperscript{28,29}. He also wrote to the Central Government stating that the State Government had no intention to give permission to the Thapers.

The whole scenario was completely changed due to some sudden developments in the political set up in the state. Due to the new developments N.E. Belaram, the Industries Minister was replaced by T.V. Thomas who could not join the ministry earlier due to the enquiry commission against him. When he was exonerated by the enquiry commission, T.V. Thomas was nominated by the party to replace N.E. Belaram, as the Industries Minister. When the new minister took charge his policy towards the establishment of Titanium complex was just opposit to that of N. E. Belaram. T.V. Thomas wanted it to be in the private sector. The Central Government was also in favour of the Thapers. At the same time most of the political parties in the state were against granting the permission to a monopoly house. T.V. Thomas insisted that the Thapers were highly qualified and suitable for starting such a company in Kerala. He argued that the Thapers were able to fulfill the conditions
required to start a firm and they were ready to start it in any other state if Kerala was not prepared to give permission. T.V.Thomas stood firmly in favour of the Thapers. It was a difficult problem for the chief minister to take a decision because T.V.Thomas was one of the senior most leaders in the party and he was not able to take a decision by over taking him. There was no agreement on the issue even among the members of the Cabinet.

In the meantime the Department of Industries in Kerala continued its efforts to grant permission to the Thapers. The Central Government also gave its support to the efforts of the State government. When this combined movement of the Central and State governments were brought to light by a newspaper it began to create widespread criticism against it. The public as well as the newspapers along with political parties began to criticize the attitude of the government. N.E.Belaram also came out openly against it. A. K. Antony the leader of the Liaison Committee led a delegation to the Central Industrial Minister C. Subramanyam and requested him not to give permission to start the Titanium Complex under private sector.
The Chief Minister who kept a studied silence regarding the issue finally came forward with an open declaration that the final decision regarding the issue should be taken by the Liaison Committee. The Central Government also came forward with a suggestion that it would stand by the decision taken by the State Government. The role of the Chief Minister was to bring about a common platform for all the ruling partners. It was in keeping with these principles that he authorized the liaison committee to take a final decision and that was the only possible suggestion that the chief minister could take. The Liaison committee on its part authorized the cabinet to take a decision. After prolonged discussions the Cabinet took a decision to withdraw its support to the private company to start Titanium Complex in the State. The Chief Minister’s role was very crucial in taking such a decision. Even though he was against the private sector starting Titanium company in Kerala from the very beginning he did not come out openly because it was a fight between two senior leaders from his own party. If he had sided with any one of them it would have created a split within the party. Achutha Menon wanted to avoid such a development at any cost. When the responsibilities of taking
a final decision was given to the cabinet the Chief Minister played his role effectively and decision was taken by the Cabinet without putting blame on anybody. Achutha Menon was able to prove once again that he was a taskmaster in solving vexatious problems without further complications.

Notes and References

1. Malayala Manorama, Kottayam, 11 January, 1973
2. Ibid. 14th January 1973
3. As the prices of essential commodities increased the government employees found it difficult to make the both ends meet. So their demand for increase of salary was justified. The demand for the appointment of a pay commission was based on the usual practice followed by the government.
4. The NGO union was the biggest organisation of the government employees in Kerala. It is under the control of the Marxist Party. The NGO association was under the control of the Congress Party and the Joint Council under the control of the CPI.
5. Malayala Manorama, Kottayam, 11 January, 1973


8. The declaration of Essential Service Act is a last step taken by the government to defeat the strike of government employees. As per this act 6 months imprisonment and a fine of Rs 1000/- can be awarded to the employees who are on strike after the declaration of Essential Service Act.


15. *Deshabhimani*, Ernakulam, 17th January 1973
16. Press Communication issued by the Chief Minister 10th February, 1973

17. *The Indian Express*, Madurai, 18th July, 1973


20. When the electricity employees attempted to sabotage electric installations it was considered to be an antinational activity by the government.


24. Press Communication issued by the Chief Minister, 13th September, 1973


27. *Ibid*


